



## *Nutrition & African Dance: Synthesizing Health In A Whole New Way*

***Families of African American Ancestry Manifesting Our Excellence***

### **Healthy beat African dance steps get kids onto their feet and into better shape**

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**T**he rhythm of the drums pulls them across the floor, stepping, swaying, their eyes glued to dance leader Chahn Chess.

For an hour each Tuesday, Chess transforms a corner of the Delmann Heights Community Center into a celebration of African dance.

Dance draws the neighborhood kids in. Good health is the goal.

Public-health experts in San Bernardino County are using traditional African dance to combat childhood obesity, an especially serious problem for African-American children in low-income areas of Rialto and San Bernardino, said county nutritionist Donna Marino.

A recent study of public schoolchildren in the state Assembly district serving Rialto and San Bernardino found that 45 percent of African-American students tested were out of shape and 26 percent were overweight. Nationwide, numerous studies have reported that more than 60 percent of youngsters are obese.

Heart disease, diabetes and high blood pressure are problems that take root in the unhealthy eating and exercise habits of children, Marino said.

"We can't give up on them," she said.

#### **Nutrition program**

To fight childhood obesity, Marino and other officials at the county's Department of Public Health are using a \$150,000 grant to provide a nutrition program called F.A.M.E - Families of African-Americans Manifesting Our Excellence.

They've been dancing since January.

Five afternoons and one evening each week, members of the F.A.M.E team meet neighborhood children in recreation rooms and kids' clubs in Rialto and San Bernardino. They encourage the youth to dance their way to good health.

The captivating rhythms of African dance are a natural way to get kids on their feet, said county nutritionist Teslyn Henry. Africans have long used dance to express their feelings and beliefs about morality, character and community, or to celebrate events such as a young person's coming of age.

"Dance is a generally accepted way of delivering social messages within the African-American community," she said

Behind the music is a message: five a day.

"Five servings of fruit and five servings of vegetables a day," Marino said.

The program's choreographer is incorporating the five-a-day message into every session with moves symbolizing fruits and vegetables.

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F.A.M.E. staffers also provide a healthy snack - such as an orange - at the end of each class. Dancers are also asked to taste healthy entrees, with the hope that they'll want to try out the recipes at home.

While the program focuses on young African-Americans, Marino said all are welcome.

A Tuesday night family dance class in San Bernardino brings out adults, who are encouraged to stretch, jump and twist along with their children.

#### **Exercise disguised as fun**

African dance is serious exercise disguised as fun, Chess said.

He begins each session slowly, setting up his stereo equipment and getting the kids started with warm-up movements.

"We get to exercise before we do any dancing," said 8-year-old Monisha Hodges. "We warm up."

At a recent Delmann center class, a handful of children take the lead in following Chess, spinning, tumbling and bringing together small pieces of a dance.

"One, two, step," Chess said. "OK, watch your footwork."

Chess turned to a handful of boys standing against the wall.

"You gotta try," Chess said.

One by one, drawn to the dance by a joyfully contagious beat, more children join the group.

One young woman jumps in, matching Chess step

for step in a set of moves that had the kids whooping with delight.

"You see that?" said Carolyn Martin, a Delmann center staff member. "That kid had it goin' on."

Nell Gory said her 8-year-old granddaughter, Alyssa, loves African dancing.

"Oh, I think it's a fabulous program," Gory said. "It's wonderful to have in this neighborhood. I'm glad it's in this neighborhood."

The classes will last through September. In coming months, Marino said the young dancers will put their dance skills on display for parents and the community.

Monisha Hodges said she can't wait for that chance.

"I like African-American dancing because it's real fun," Monisha said. "It's hard dancing. It's really, really fun, but real hard."

By the end of that recent class, Chess and his young charges were drenched in sweat. The drinking fountain became the most popular spot in the center.

Chess grinned. He said the children are so busy dancing, they forget they're exercising.

"That's the idea," he said.

